

A Single Bullet

By MARK HELPRIN

Most leaders who decide upon war do so amid what they report to have been the ineluctable compulsion of events with a life of their own. And when things get out of hand, it is usually after a period of euphoria has masked the small signals of danger that in later sobriety stand out with such melancholy force.

The lamps of Europe are burning brilliantly but out of control. Far too much rides upon Mikhail Gorbachev, for real power in the Soviet Bloc is still centralized in him, and he alone holds back the perfectly intact mechanisms of repression. The facts suggest a major Soviet *revanche* with unpredictable consequences in and among the blocs. Not since Sarajevo or Munich has so grave a peril been so unappreciated by so many.

Though the press, intelligence agencies and shallow think tanks proffer triumphalist analyses, this is only because institutional needs take precedence over the blaze of individual genius and the simple light of the truth. Institutional analysis tells us that the Shah rules the Iran that conquered the Iraq that invaded the Saudi Arabia that owns the America that, in the depression before the nuclear war, ran out of resources just as President Dukakis visited Argentina, victor of the Falklands. And it tells us that Europe is safe.

Consider nonetheless a short list of fundamentals: the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc, the centrifugality of the Soviet republics, and the demise of the Soviet economy.

A Red Line

Vadim Medvedev, the Soviet Communist Party's chief of ideology, believes that divisiveness in Soviet society and secessionist trends in the republics are enough in themselves to cause "the end of *perestroika*" and "our new role in the international community." This is obviously a red line, and yet the country continues to break apart not merely in protest of the forced unity of natural differences but because opportunity generates its own momentum.

The Soviets are attempting to restructure a failed centralized economy by means of a centralized design—a strategy that needs no further comment—and they have no room for mistakes, no political or economic elasticity save their legendary ability to suffer. If Western economies stumble in the near future, the privations of economic transition in the East will be impossible to bear, in that the model for which the East has undertaken to suffer will appear, justifiably or not, to have been an illusion. Keep in mind that in the Soviet economy full employment comes first, and that the national unemployment rate is (unofficially) 17%. Mr. Gorbachev can overcome all difficulties if he can deliver the economy, but he cannot deliver the economy.

The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact is more acutely damaging to Mr. Gorbachev's chances of survival than even the worsening consumer ice age over which he presides. He was not helped when West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, on a trip ostensibly to reassure the Poles, refused to accept the immutability of the Polish-German border: Fundamental Soviet interests guarantee that the rise of Germany will force a reassessment of the disintegration of the pact and the loss of buffer states, and with reassessment may come a change of personnel.

Nonetheless, conventional wisdom in

the West—"now that Soviet threat no longer exists..."—accepts Mr. Gorbachev's probity and permanence. American intelligence appears to believe that he has replaced hostile elements of the armed forces, but the word on the street in Moscow is the opposite, and a noted Soviet parliamentarian told this newspaper in September that "all the officers who support *perestroika* have been discharged." In this autumn of Eastern Europe, the Red Army continued to speak its ancient language, detaining American military observers and bayoneting tires, as if to signal that it is not to be dismissed as an independent actor, and it is not. The KGB and the party, bent out of shape by Mr. Gorbachev, can snap back.

The Soviet president will not magically rid the military, the KGB and the party of institutional memory, because his infalli-

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bility is a wishful creation of the Western press: Though Mr. Gorbachev originally called for the dissolution of the blocs, he reversed himself when he saw what he had wrought. Still, he says with baseless assurance that "the 1990s promise to become the most fruitful period in the history of civilization," and I say that one must always question the probity and permanence of anyone whose stability depends upon increasing his velocity.

The Stalinists whom Mr. Gorbachev has stuffed into deep and unpleasant buckets may burst from them as if shot from a cannon. The smallest part of recent events in East Europe would have been, a short time ago, *casus belli* for the Soviet Union, justifying a full-scale invasion. Moreover, the Soviets do not and cannot view German reunification with America's careless indifference.

Though the Franco-Prussian War and two world wars were the result of heartfelt German ideals, slipshod European statesmanship, and unintended consequences, the Germans still believe that purity of intention can remake the world. The concert of Europe that they wish to inspire is not impossible, but it is improbable, and efforts to achieve it more often than not put disruptive strain upon the international system. This does not and will not matter to them, for their ethos is not to understand that the perfect is the enemy of the good, but, rather, to pursue an ideal so tensely that it shatters.

They are at it again, having virtually unified, as daily reportage attests. The Schengen talks on European Community open borders serve to query Bonn about reunification; and in refusing to control the inter-German border, Bonn has stated its position unequivocally. If the counter-revolution falls in the Soviet Union, either from lack of boldness or too much of it, the counter-counter-revolutionaries may be obsessed with German ascendancy and take the plunge to reclaim strategic depth. The Brezhnev Doctrine did not die with Brezhnev, just as it was not invented by him. Should a Soviet *revanche* include the recapture and repression of an East Ger-

many locked in de facto unification with the Federal Republic, hell could break loose as the NATO Germans suddenly discover something for which they will lay down their lives.

America faces these dangers with slogans. Though "the end of history" and "the peace dividend" make no more sense than "tennis balls cause cancer" and "the Arabian resuscitation," they are the intellectual foundation for habitual capitulationists who resent having to receive concessions, because they are happy only when they are making them.

With no inkling of why Mr. Gorbachev may fall, they refuse to look closely at his crumbling economy, affronted military, slighted party and disintegrating empire, and seem to believe that the U.S., prostrate before the South Bronx, can pull these chestnuts from the fire with some beltocentric puffery. Are these not the same people who call the U.S. an impotent giant, who shrink at the thunder of Daniel Ortega, and dare not set foot in Beirut? El Salvador is too big a bite and should be left to the locals, but the U.S.S.R. you do in the afternoon.

Vision is the word used by those who do not comprehend what it is they do not have to offer. Critics of President Bush's instinctive caution, citing vision, have forced him to compromise with negligence. One of the "Wise Men" validating with his resume America's insatiable desire to throw off its burdens is Robert McNamara, once a burden himself. Despite nearly undiminished Soviet military capacity, he wants to cut the U.S. defense budget in half. His recklessness is allowed the front page, as perhaps it should be, for as one of the chief architects of both our gratuitous involvement in and unnecessary defeat by Vietnam, Mr. McNamara should be closely watched so that the public may safely seek the opposite of what he recommends.

Gradually and Steadily

Reduction of forces should be conceived to take some strain off the Soviet economy while neither imperiling Western defense (which a 50% cut obviously would) nor requiring a change in the political structures it serves, for the preservation of NATO is essential not so much to meet contingencies as to deter them. The dissolution of empire in the East, the re-integration of Central with Western Europe, the diminution of orders of battle, and the shifting of alignments must occur gradually and steadily if they are to last and not turn shockingly bitter.

If *perestroika* succeeds too well, a classic power rivalry will come into play, and if it fails, ideological confrontation will return. What appears to some to be the concert of Europe is merely a moment of relief within a moment of hesitation. Because half the continent is in thrall, the other half should seek gravity, stability and continuity. This means, among other things, rejection of the premise and spur driving Mikhail Gorbachev, who, to continue, must accelerate. It means awakening to the fallacies of hope. It means that the policy of great nations and the fate of the West must not be allowed to depend on the fortunes of one man alone, no matter how positive his effect, for if the fate of the West rests upon one man, it rests upon a single bullet.

Mr. Helprin is a novelist and political commentator. This is the latest of four articles that began in 1988 with "War in Europe: Thinking the Unthinkable."